

Living Lightly on

A small, day-lit house deep in the Tennessee woods brings one retirement couple closer to their natural surroundings

BY TINA GOVAN

When Sam and Anne Eich began planning their retirement, they came to me with the desire to build a simple, affordable home in Tennessee’s Cherokee National Forest. They wanted their new house to accommodate them, their dogs, and the occasional visit from their daughter. Like many heading toward retirement, they saw their new house as an opportunity to downsize, to simplify, and to learn to live with less. They wanted a house that focused attention on its setting. Anne wanted the feeling of living in a tree house, and a big screened-in porch was high on her wish list.

In response, I designed a house that is sensitive to the forested landscape, that brings in lots of light and views, and that is constructed of simple, durable materials that demand little maintenance for a couple longing for stress-free living.

A steep site leads to a creative layout

To minimize disturbance to the site, I broke the house into smaller pieces, each only 16 ft. wide.

This way, the house could closely follow the contours of the land, and front-to-back grade changes would be minimal. This enabled most of the house to exist on a single level, which is important for older homeowners who would rather not be forced to navigate lots of level changes and stairways. The four main building blocks—the carport, the master-bedroom suite, the kitchen/dining/living area, and the den/guest wing—are each treated as individual “houses” gathered around a courtyard on one side and a screened porch on the other. The home reads as several small buildings rather than just one big one.

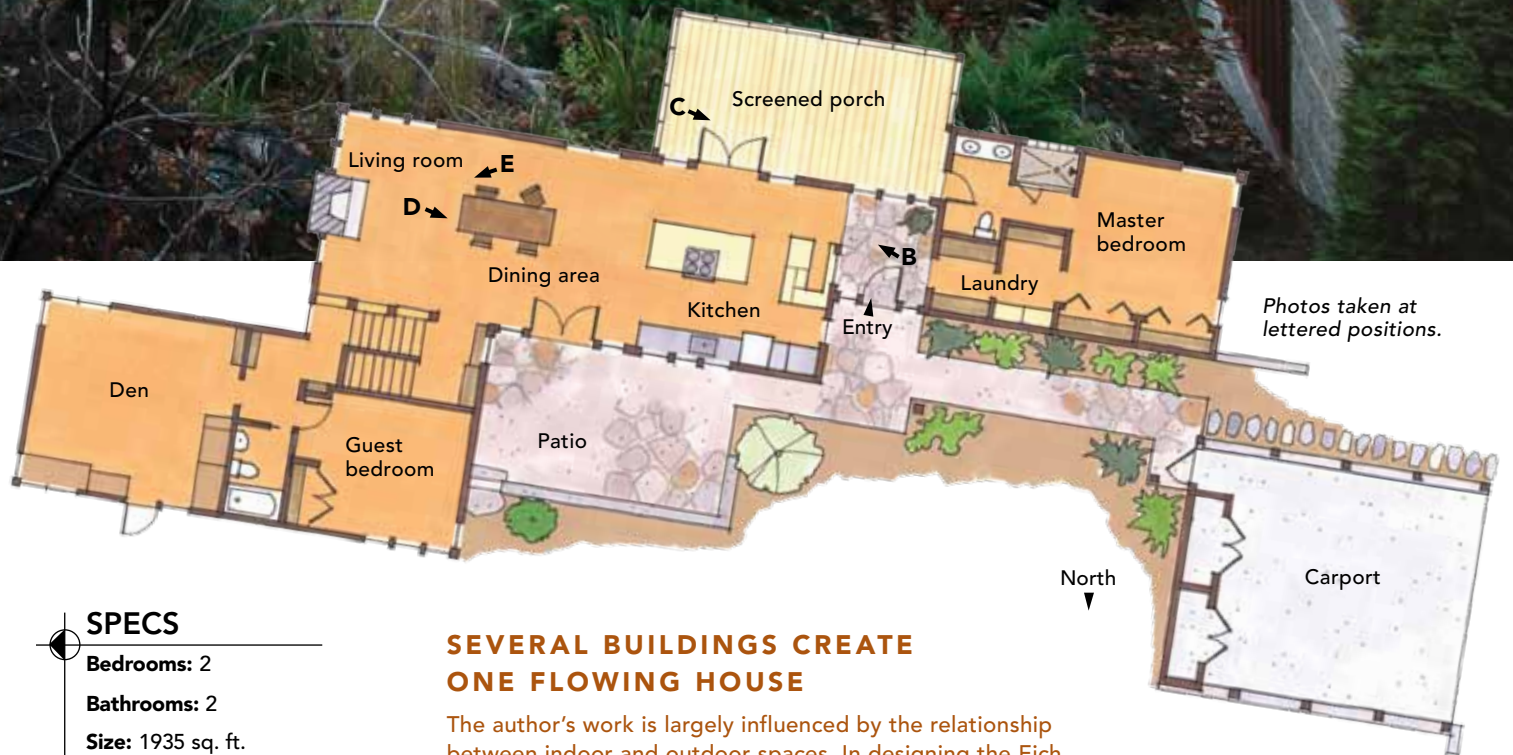
I also wanted the house to sit comfortably within its natural and built environments. Colors and building materials were chosen to blend into the natural vegetation and to mimic the clusters of outbuildings you see on farms in the valley below.

Natural-lighting strategies have multiple benefits

Because the house is narrow, daylight can stream from one exterior wall to the other, so the entire



the Mountain



SPECS

- Bedrooms:** 2
- Bathrooms:** 2
- Size:** 1935 sq. ft.
- Cost:** \$125 per sq. ft.
- Completed:** 2006
- Location:** Butler, Tenn.
- Architect:** Tina Govan; www.tinagovan.com
- Builder:** Lester Rominger

SEVERAL BUILDINGS CREATE ONE FLOWING HOUSE

The author's work is largely influenced by the relationship between indoor and outdoor spaces. In designing the Eich project, she saw the house and site as one, weaving indoor rooms together with outdoor ones. Rather than treat the house as a single object, she designed it as several "houses," each with its own designated living space, and tied to two key outdoor areas: a porch and a patio. The houses and adjacent outdoor areas sit on a single level, which allows for easier access throughout indoor and outdoor living spaces. Photo above taken at A on floor plan.

Outdoor spaces inside. The entry foyer (top photo) is finished with stone tile and painted clapboard siding that matches the exterior cladding. Floor-to-ceiling glass lets in an abundance of light thanks to porch skylights (bottom photo). The space is intended to feel more like a breezeway between “houses” than a traditional entry, and it begs visitors to question whether they’re inside or outside. Photos taken at B and C on floor plan.



house is lit by the sun when it is low in the sky. The lighting strategy, accomplished with an abundance of large windows, double doors, and few interior partitions, also helps with passive cooling; southwesterly breezes can easily pass through the house.

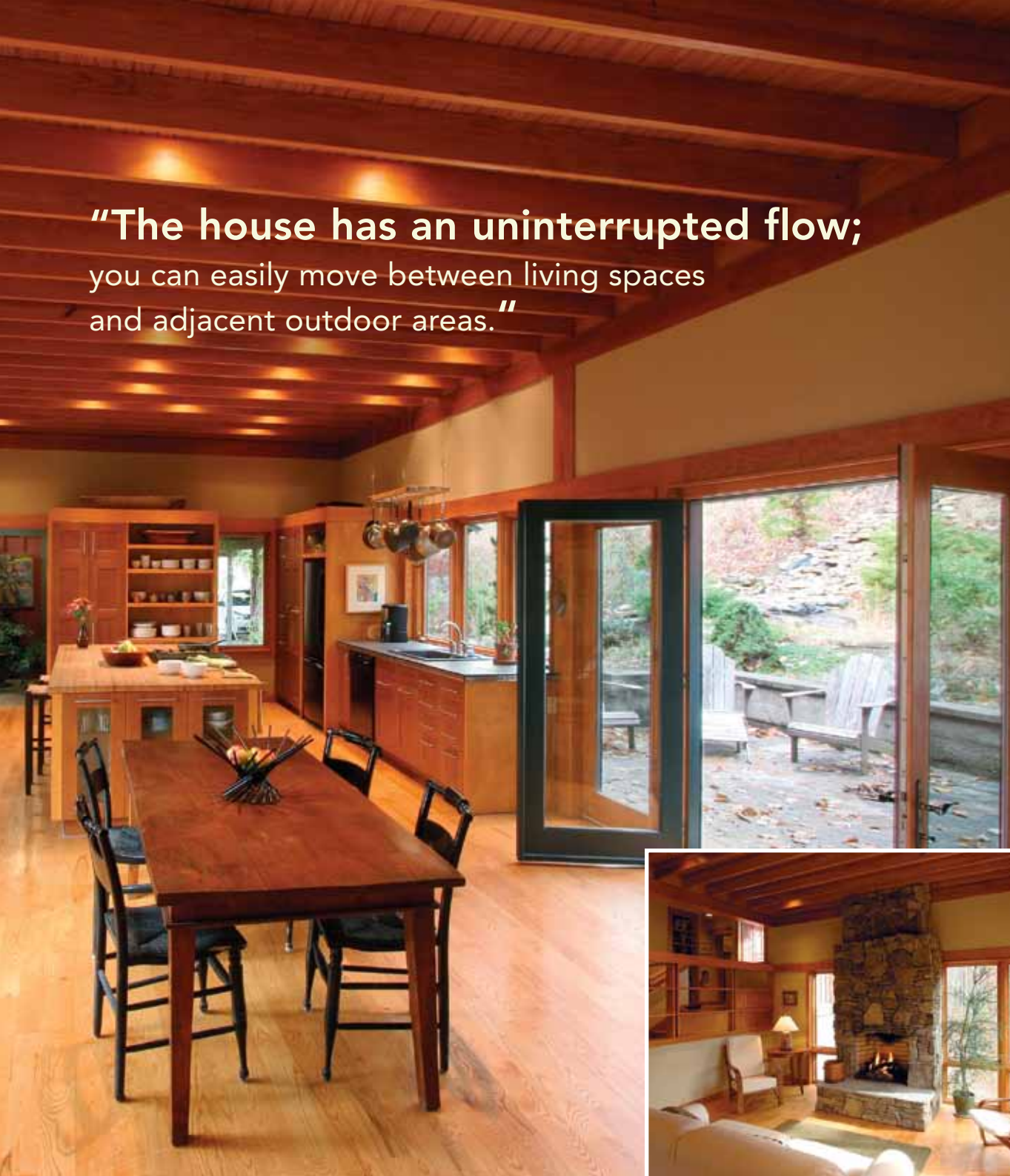
Having open interior spaces flanked by windows and doors also helps to build a strong connection between the front and back of the house, and between indoor spaces, expansive exterior views, and outdoor sitting areas. On the south, a large screened porch projects into the treetops. The north side, on the other hand, digs into the hillside,

offering a striking sense of contrast in a mere 16 ft. It includes a patio sheltered by the mountain and accessed from the dining area by double doors. The house has an uninterrupted flow; you can easily move between living spaces and adjacent outdoor areas.

A simplified design keeps costs in check

The budget for this project was tight, so to keep down costs, we kept the structure of each “house” simple. Outside, we achieved texture and detail by offsetting each of the buildings, creating inviting out-

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Light shines in where views extend out. Lots of windows and double doors in the kitchen and dining space (photo left) offer nearly uninterrupted views of the sloping forest. Within the same large space, the living room (photo below) is washed in daylight that pours through a bank of large casement windows. Photos taken at D and E on floor plan.



door areas, and selecting simple yet attractive finishes. For example, the carport wall is a decorative assembly of plywood, posts, and staggered 2x2s that cast intricate shadows on the entrance walkway. Past the carport, a sunny courtyard garden and patio are revealed, enclosed by the mountain on one side and the house on the other. Paralleling a landscaped walk, the entry roof pulls away from the house to create a trellis, allowing light to pass through to the garden below.

The interior of the house is kept simple as well, with a focus on open, continuous spaces. Rather than solid, full-height walls, partial

walls, built-ins, and furniture are used to distinguish spaces. This allows for a variety of flexible living areas and eliminates construction complexity that typically drives up building costs. Through simplified design details and material selection—ash floors, pine trim, and Ikea cabinetry—we were able to achieve a level of detail, definition, and comfort that defies the cost of the house. □

Tina Govan is an architect in Raleigh, N.C. Photos by Rob Yagid, except where noted.